Travis Roy had his skates laced for the first time when he was 20 months old and, growing up, learned to play hockey on the rink his father managed in Maine. Hockey became his passion.

It changed his life—but not in the way he had anticipated. Just 11 seconds into his first game on the Boston University hockey team, he crashed into the boards and became paralyzed from the shoulders down.

“The accident was not part of my plan,” he says.

While his plan changed, he’s made the most of it as a motivational speaker, painter, author, and volunteer for the Travis Roy Foundation, which has raised nearly $6 million to help others with spinal cord injuries.

“Travis Roy’s story can teach us a great deal about the human spirit and about what it takes to overcome adversity,” says Paul B. Mack, executive director of the Robert A. Foisie School of Business. “By showing resiliency and how we can reinvent ourselves when tragedy strikes, Travis can be an inspiration to all of us. I know he is an inspiration to me. I hope we see a little of ourselves in his story.”

Roy will tell his story during a special presentation.

Click here to register for Travis Roy: A Story of Tragedy, Courage & Triumph
Tuesday, March 24, 2015, 4 to 6 p.m.
Campus Center Odeum

Roy’s Passion for Hockey Becomes a Passion for Life

October 20, 1995 was both the best day and the worst day of Travis Roy’s life.

He remembers being in the locker room, taping his hockey sticks with his name imprinted on them. He remembers saying to his father, “I made it.” He remembers the euphoria of stepping out on the ice as part of a team.

“It was everything I hoped it would be,” he said.

But he also remembers crashing into the boards just 11 seconds into his first hockey game playing for Boston University. Still conscious as he was taken off the ice, he felt no pain. He felt nothing, because the accident cracked his vertebra and left him paralyzed from the shoulders down, although he soon recovered partial use of one hand.

“I had an instantaneous feeling that I was in big trouble,” Roy said, “and that life as I knew it was over.”

And yet Roy has created a new life for himself, as he will discuss in, “Travis Roy: A Story of Tragedy, Courage and Triumph,” a special presentation from 4 to 6 p.m. on Tuesday, March 24, 2015 in the Campus Center Odeum. To register, click here.

In his new life, he volunteers 50 to 60 hours a week for the Travis Roy Foundation, which has raised nearly $6 million to help others with spinal cord injuries and to fund research. He also earns a living as a motivational speaker, telling his story throughout the country. His paintings, made with a brush in his mouth, have been exhibited in art galleries, and his book, Eleven Seconds, which he wrote with Sports Illustrated reporter E.M. Swift, is included in the curriculum of many middle and high schools.

But his accident is a constant part of his life – something he can never leave behind, not even for a second, because, Roy said, “Paralysis never takes a break.”

As a quadriplegic, the things we do quickly, almost without thinking, take much of Roy’s time. He needs someone to bathe and dress him, to feed him and brush his teeth, to turn on the television and to open doors. He has to depend on others to ensure that his medical supplies have been ordered and to show up for appointments.

“There are so many layers of thinking that go into living as a quadriplegic,” he said. He finds it all exhausting, but he is
motivated to face his challenges and keep going.

“...there are times when we choose our challenges, as he did growing up and striving to become a hockey player, and “...there are times when our challenges simply chose us.”

“It’s what we do in the face of those challenges that defines who we are and what we become,” Roy said. “With every challenge, you have a choice to face it and deal with it, or let it lead the way.”

One of the Fortunate Ones

As a boy, he wanted to take his hockey skills as far as he could, perhaps playing in the Olympics or the National Hockey League, so he challenged himself and played well enough to attend BU on a scholarship.

While hockey caused his accident, the mental attitude he developed playing hockey and other sports also helped him address the challenge that chose him, but it took time.

“There is a point in any devastating injury or diagnosis where you have the right to feel what you feel; you need to feel those things,” Roy said. “I never felt anger or frustration. I just had this sadness.”

The sadness lasted for four months. Then, as he began rehabilitation at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, Roy saw people who were even less fortunate than he was. Some had no family support. Others had no insurance. Still others had to spend the rest of their lives on a wheelchair.

“...After 20 years in a wheelchair, I’m concerned about how my body would respond to standing and walking, but I...”

While attending school, he also helped start the Travis Roy Foundation and met weekly with Swift to be interviewed for his book. He also began speaking at Rotary Clubs, hockey camps and other organizations. After five years of public speaking at small organizations, he found an agent and began speaking at larger groups, traveling around the country.

“I share my story and my values,” he said. “It makes people think a little differently about their lives.”

Technology Makes a Difference

He takes pride in being able to earn a living with his public speaking, but his passion for hockey has turned into a passion for living life and helping others. The Travis Roy Foundation provides wheelchairs and other aid to those with spinal cord injuries, and it is also funding research to discover a cure.

“It’s amazing what people with disabilities can do if they have the right technology,” Roy said. “The foundation’s goal is to make their lives easier. Having the right lift to get a loved one out of bed makes all the difference. Having a voice-activated computer opens a whole new world.”

Technology has not only advanced, but dropped in price, so that a dictation program that may have cost $5,000 when it was introduced now sells for just $75.

Wheelchairs have become lighter and easier to move. Too. While Roy can navigate the streets of Boston more easily on his wheelchair than he used to, what he wants most still eludes him – his independence.

He quotes a fellow quadriplegic who, when discussing the possibility of regaining the use of his limbs, said, “I can’t wait to do the things I hated to do,” such as shoveling snow.

Roy believes research advances are taking him closer to potentially using his limbs again, although after two decades in a wheelchair, his muscles have atrophied to the point where he believes he may not be able to walk even if a cure is developed.

“...After 20 years in a wheelchair, I’m concerned about how my body would respond to standing and walking, but I...”

will take great pleasure in knowing (the foundation) played a part when it does come – that we played a role in putting an end to paralysis.”

The “big idea” now, Roy believes, is the use of epidural electrical stimulation, which may help quadriplegics regain bladder, bowel and sexual function, as well as some motor function.

“It’s a huge step,” Roy said. “Yes, I want to walk, but this could change lives dramatically. Other research is focusing more on hand and arm function. Give me my hands and I could drive again. That really changes my level of independence.”

One reason Roy has accomplished much, in spite of his confinement to a wheelchair is that he sets goals. He’s surpassed his financial goals and is close to achieving his goal of being debt-free by age 40. He’s also in the process of achieving his third goal – having a seasonal cottage built in Colchester, Vt.

“Goal setting is a cliché, but it works,” he said. “I saw it work prior to my injury; it helped me realize my dream. I’ve seen it work again since then. There’s a gravitational pull if you wake up every day knowing where you want to go. If your goals are on your mind nonstop, you’re far more likely to accomplish them.”

But he also acknowledges that it’s the love he receives from family and friends, and even from strangers who respond to his story, that has helped him come so far.

“I am proud of how everyone has rallied around my story,” Roy said. “I hope people feel like they are a part of it. I’ve always felt the support from the community, from Boston, from New England. They’re always cheering me on.”

This event is co-sponsored by Student Activities Leadership Programs; Physical Education, Recreation, and Athletics; Student Government Association; Office of Multicultural Affairs; Office of Disabilities Services; and ACCESS.

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The Robert A. Foisie School of Business is rooted in WPI’s strengths in technology, engineering, and science, and is known for developing innovative and entrepreneurial leaders for a global technological world. The part-time MBA program at the Foisie School of Business has been ranked number one in the northeast by Businessweek since 2007. The undergraduate programs for entrepreneurship and information systems were ranked number one in the country, and the operations management program was ranked number four by Businessweek in 2013.